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AUTHOR Willower, Donald J.; Stetter, Michael W.
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ABSTRACT

Much recent research on educational organizations, including that of Meyer and Rowan (1977, 1978), has depicted them as ritualistically legitimated, internally loosely-coupled systems. Willower, however, has argued (1982) that legitimization of schools by their communities is not merely ritualistic but is ordinarily problematic. To examine principals' perceptions of the problems posed to their schools' legitimacy by teacher misconduct and the manner in which they learned about and reacted to such misconduct, half-hour to one-hour interviews were conducted in January and February 1983 with 45 senior high school and junior-senior high school principals in a diverse 7-county area of a large northeastern state. The bulk of the incidents principals recalled dealing with teacher misconduct concerned student-related "damaging" teacher behavior. Principals tended to be sensitive to the potential impact of teacher behavior on a school's image and were quick to give attention to any problems that might threaten the legitimacy of their organizations. Findings of the study do not confirm Meyer and Rowan's and other recent accounts emphasizing ritual legitimization; rather, they suggest how problematic legitimization ordinarily is for schools and how tightly bound administrators and teachers are to each other in containing potential threats to school legitimacy. (JBM)

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SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AS THRESHOLD GUARDIANS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

by

Donald J. Willower

and

Michael W. Stetter

The Pennsylvania State University

Rackley Bldg
University Park, Pa 16802

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ABSTRACT

This study was an examination of secondary school principals' threshold guardian behavior. Forty-five principals were interviewed concerning their experiences with and perceptions about serious incidents of teacher misconduct. The principals guarded the thresholds of misconduct, attempting to head off, dampen, and contain such incidents. They preferred to resolve incidents in-house, but resorted to formal sanctions when necessary.

Findings suggested limitations to the concepts of loose coupling, the logic of confidence, and ritualistic legitimation. Legitimation for school organizations is ordinarily problematic, not assured. Teacher behavior that could threaten legitimation is circumscribed, and teachers preserve leeway by avoiding threshold areas where behavior and supervision are tightly coupled.

SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AS THRESHOLD GUARDIANS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Recent work on educational organizations has depicted them as loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976; 1980) and as institutional organizations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; 1978). Both Weick and Meyer and Rowan emphasized the loose coupling of internal organizational elements. Meyer and Rowan have spelled out in some detail the implications of their perspective for public schools.

Their view of coupling is tied to the concepts of institutionalization and the logic of confidence. They contend that schools are the creatures of the society, reflecting societal values and conforming to uniformity-inducing societal controls. Society both regulates and legitimates the schools through ritual classifications such as the credentialing of personnel and the accreditation of programs. Such categories are institutionalized in the larger society and mirrored in the schools' organizational arrangements. What Meyer and Rowan call the logic of confidence is the assumption of good faith, in this case, that school personnel are carrying out their duties in an appropriate manner.

Institutionalization and the logic of confidence enable school activities and outcomes to be loosely coupled or decoupled without dire consequences for the organization. Thus, supervision and instruction, or instruction and learning outcomes can be decoupled because the entire enterprise is ritually legitimated and because it is assumed that participants are doing what they should be doing.

Meyer and Rowan's approach blends external consensus about schools with internal dissensus, and Meyer and his colleagues (1980) have empirically examined school administrators' and teachers' perceptions of school policies, rules, and practices and interpreted the results as reflecting internal loose coupling in schools.

While the loose coupling and institutional organizations perspectives have enriched the literature on educational organizations, there have been numerous

criticisms. To cite just a few, Spence, Takei and Sim (1978) pointed to extensive tight coupling within schools, and Ouchi (1980) and Beyer (1981) noted that the institutional organizations approach ignored internal school cultures, while Michaelsen (1981) argued that internal dissensus and loose coupling were barren concepts in the sense that they could not generate predictions about student outcomes, even in starkly contrasting school settings.

In an analysis that was the starting point for the empirical work reported in this article, Willower (1982) made a number of points bearing on both the loose coupling and the institutional organizations perspectives. His arguments can be briefly sketched as follows.

General similarities and a degree of internal consensus in schools are fostered by structural features such as the mandated and socially defined organization-student relationship, and the nature of typical classroom arrangements and the teaching task, reinforced by teacher and student subcultures with distinctive norms and status systems that reflect respective adult and student values that are quite different and sometimes in conflict.

Tight coupling in the sense of routinization and regulation by rules is common with regard to students. Teachers enjoy considerable leeway in their work, as school administrators, alert to the importance of autonomy to teachers and constrained in other ways such as by the union contract, typically supervise teachers with a light touch. However, this is not necessarily indicative of a logic of confidence. In fact, teachers are well aware of the rules of the game and rarely violate them. At the same time, school principals, the administrators who work most closely with teachers, commonly know what is going on in their schools and are ready to head off problems before they become crises. These administrators are threshold guardians because they

anticipate and dampen behavior that appears likely to cross the thresholds of impropriety.

The community is a major source of normative content. The school is a public and politically vulnerable organization that responds to perceived community pressures, but the environment is more pluralistic than is suggested by Meyer and Rowan's account. Legitimation is not merely ritualistic, but is ordinarily problematic for school organizations, and can be threatened by internal or school related behavior or incidents seen as deviant by significant segments of the community. Hence, administrators guard the thresholds of deviance (Willower, 1982).

The Study

The present inquiry was designed to gather exploratory data on these ideas by interviewing secondary school principals. The general purpose of the study was to examine principals' perceptions of the incidence and character of teacher misconduct, and the manner in which the principals learned about and reacted to it.

More specifically, we were interested in what principals perceived to be teacher behavior that was damaging to the school with the community and what they saw as teacher behavior that was helpful to the school with the community. In addition to these depictions of behavior that presumably reflected perceived community norms, the principals were asked to describe from its inception to conclusion an incident of serious teacher misbehavior with which they had to deal. The principals were also queried about the frequency of teacher misconduct, how they found out about such cases and how they handled them, including their timing. Their perceptions of whether certain types of teachers were more likely to engage in aberrant behavior were probed as well.

An interview schedule consisting of 21 open-ended questions was the main data gathering device. The questions were straight forward and directly on the content just sketched. For example, on harmful and helpful teacher behavior, the principals were asked to "Name some teacher behaviors that you think help the school's image in the community" and "Name some teacher behaviors that you think would damage the school's image in the community." On the specific incident of misconduct, the main question was "Describe a serious incident of teacher misbehavior which happened during your current principalship." Accompanying probes were "When did this incident happen?" "How did you learn of this incident?" "How did you resolve the situation?" "Did members of the community learn of this incident before you did?" If yes, "What was their reaction?" and "If left uncorrected by you, how would this incident have affected your school in the community?" For a copy of the interview schedule and details on other aspects of the research see Stetter (1983).

The initial form of the interview schedule was piloted with four principals, and some revisions were made. In addition, the decision was made to take handwritten notes rather than use a tape recorder. Both techniques were tried during the pilot interviews; the former was less obtrusive and the principals appeared more comfortable with it.

The Sample

The sample of public school principals interviewed was selected from all senior high school and combined junior-senior high school principals in a diverse seven county area of a large northeastern state. The 91 such principals in this area were numbered from one to 91 and, using the simple random draw procedure described by Loether and McTavish (1976), numbers were drawn until all of the principals were chosen.

In order to obtain a sample of 45 interviewees, the first 60 principals identified in the random draw procedure were contacted by letter about participation in the research. Fifty-five replied and 48 agreed to participate. Three were dropped to bring the group into closer agreement with state-level data on the distribution of school district enrollments.

All 45 principals were males. Their mean age was 45.4 years. The average principal had held his current position for 6.5 years, had 8.7 years experience as a principal, and a total of 22.6 years in education. Based on median categories, the typical principal headed a school of from 1000 to 1500 pupils with 40 to 60 faculty members including one assistant principal. The communities served by the principals' schools were characterized by them primarily as suburban in 16 cases, as rural in 15, as small town in 12, and as urban in two.

The characteristics of the interviewees approximated those found in national and state studies which show that secondary school principals tend to be males in their 40's. In addition, school district-wide student enrollments, a variable often associated with other organizational characteristics, were distributed in the present sample in a way that closely approximated the distribution for the entire state, although the sample was slightly overrepresentative of larger districts.

Data Collection

Each of the 45 principals was interviewed at his school, usually in his private office. The sessions took from one-half hour to one hour. Interview responses which seemed incomplete or ambiguous were probed following Kidder's (1981) guidelines for neutral follow-up. All of the interviews were completed during January and February 1983.

Findings

Since this study was exploratory and the interview questions largely open-ended, predetermined categories of analysis were not used. Instead, the written accounts of the interviews were analyzed in order to formulate categories which in turn could facilitate interpretation. This method has been used in qualitative research and hypothesis-building by Glaser and Strauss (1965).

Teacher Misconduct: Incidents Recalled

In response to the question about a serious incident of teacher misbehavior occurring during their current tenure, the principals overwhelmingly recollected incidents having to do with students. Thirty-two (71.1%) of the principals provided this kind of response which was labeled "student welfare jeopardized." The typical incident in this category was teacher use of harsh or Draconian discipline, although there were a few cases of teachers who used drugs with or had affairs with students, and one unlikely case of a teacher who exposed himself before a class.

Two additional types of incidents were recalled by the principals. One dealt with more general norms and the other involved organizational processes or rules. Respective examples were extra-marital attachments between teachers, and the misuse of school funds or of sick leave. However, only four principals described incidents of the former kind and only three described incidents of the latter type. Six of the school administrators, all relatively new in their present positions, said they had experienced no incidents of serious teacher misbehavior. Most of the principals reported quite recent events. One-third of the incidents occurred during the current school year and nearly two-thirds occurred within the past two years.

Thirteen of the principals first learned of the episodes they described from parents, 12 from teachers or other staff members, eight from students, and four from

their own observations. One was informed by his superintendent and another by a fellow principal. Put differently, it could be said that all but two of the principals' sources were from within their own school-communities, the exceptions being the two administrators outside the sphere of the particular schools, but within the school districts. On the other hand, if parents and students are defined as organizational outsiders, then the principals' initial sources are divided fairly evenly between outsiders and insiders. In any event, the principals were among the "first to know;" 70% of those dealing with incidents believed they learned about them before community members did.

The principals' responses to the problems represented by the incidents they recounted took four forms--investigation, consultation, unofficial action and official action. All of the principals involved in incidents took some action. Indeed, almost 90% of them believed that if they did not correct the situation, their schools would be negatively affected in the community. The responses suggested that the principals quickly "took charge" especially during the early phases of the case. More than two-thirds of them investigated the situation by directly interviewing involved persons, particularly the teacher-protagonist. Nearly 60% of the principals dealing with incidents eventually initiated some sort of unofficial action and 46% initiated official action. Examples of the former were conferences directed toward resolving the problem, or changing the schedules of teachers or students. Examples of the latter included letters of reprimand, unsatisfactory ratings, temporary suspensions, transfers or, as occurred in eleven cases, dismissal by the board of education.

The principals appeared to prefer to resolve the problems "in-house" when possible. As one stated, "Once it leaves the building, the principal and faculty lose control of it." Only eleven of the principals mentioned consultation with others in the school hierarchy. Those who did consult, overwhelmingly did so with the

superintendent. However, the initiation of formal action involving the school board changed the principal's role from that of case manager to participant, often as a witness at a formal hearing.

Put briefly, when the principals were asked to describe a serious incident of teacher misbehavior, they recalled quite recent cases that involved teacher actions that jeopardized student welfare. The principals learned of these incidents early from persons close to their schools. They responded quickly and directly to head off the adverse effects on their organizations that they foresaw if they failed to act. They attempted to resolve the problems quietly without bringing in outsiders, but when necessary they resorted to official sanctions in broader arenas.

So far, the principals' reports on one incident each of them faced have been explored. Next, their more general perceptions of teacher misconduct and its social and organizational contexts are examined.

The Principals' Perceptions

The principals' perceptions of community expectations for teachers were indirectly tapped by asking them to name some teacher behaviors that would help the school's image in the community, and to name some that would damage the school's image. Helpful in-school teacher behaviors were named by 38 principals. Almost half of the total of 96 behaviors mentioned by these principals involved teacher contributions to the school that went beyond the classroom and required after-school time commitments like sponsoring student activities, coaching or attending school events. Other major categories of helpful behavior cited by the principals were communicating with parents on student progress and having a positive attitude towards students. Helpful teacher behaviors in the community were given by 33 principals who mentioned 74 examples. More than 85% of these examples described teacher

involvement in community affairs such as in civic clubs, volunteer work, and church and governmental activities.

Damaging teacher behavior noted by the principals also could be dichotomized in terms of those that were internal to the school and those that were external or community based. Thirty-seven of the principals provided 59 wide ranging illustrations of damaging in-school behavior. Shortcomings in classroom instruction and grading practices comprised the largest categories of these behaviors, while a montage of others included inappropriate strike or bargaining tactics, failure to communicate with parents or hostility towards them, offensive language or angry outbursts before students, and minimal involvement or refusal to become involved at all n extra-curricular activities. Damaging behaviors in the community were mentioned 65 times by 32 principals. More than half of these principals stressed the harmful effects to the school when improper teacher behavior was displayed openly or generated publicity; brawling, drunkenness, extra-marital affairs, involvement with drugs, and even criminal arrest and prosecution were given as examples. Failure to become involved in the community or even live in it illustrate some less dramatic types of behavior cited by smaller numbers of the administrators.

The principals were asked how many times during the previous school year they learned of incidents of serious misbehavior by a member of their faculty. Seven principals who were not in their current positions at that time did not respond. The largest response, by 50% of the rest of the administrators, was "no incidents." Eleven of the principals reported one or two incidents and eight reported three or more. A number of principals commented on the changing times. One stated that "the (turbulent) late 60s had an impact on the staff . . . it matured them." Another noted that "the teacher market has changed. The majority are committed to education, . . . know their rights . . . (and) how to solve misunderstandings." A third pointed out that

"job security problems force teachers to reconsider attitudes toward the job. I've seen a change in the last two years."

If teacher misconduct is infrequent, is it confined to a certain type of teacher? More than 90% of the principals believed that it was. They described these teachers both in terms of their teaching and their personalities. These teachers were characterized as unable to deal with students, having poor classroom management, using unethical or unprofessional judgment, and being irresponsible and not committed to teaching. They were further depicted as defensive, impatient and aggressive, immature and insecure and given to overreaction, and as inflexible and intolerant and vulnerable to stress and frustration. The principals furnished 67 responses essentially of the kinds just listed. A typical principal called such teachers "escapists." He said that "they enter teaching as a last resort. They're not motivated or enthusiastic. They're vulnerable to discipline problems and they create adversarial relations."

We turn now to the principals' sources of information and courses of action relative to the typical case of teacher deviance. When asked how they usually learn of teacher misbehavior, 26 principals mentioned teachers and staff, 17 mentioned parents, 12 mentioned students, 12 spoke of general contacts, nine named the superintendent or school board, and two mentioned their own observations. As was the case with the single recalled incident described earlier, the principals overwhelmingly said that they got their information from sources within or close to their school-communities. Teachers and staff and parents are still the principals' leading sources, but the teachers and staff replace parents as the primary source in the typical as opposed to the single actual situation.

However, when the principals were questioned about how they usually learned that the community was upset by a teacher's conduct, 25 of them indicated parents as their source, while only 11 mentioned teachers and staff. Eighteen of the principals

said the superintendent or school board was a typical source, but only three mentioned students. Twenty-eight of the principals also referred to such media as "personal contacts," letters, and telephone calls.

The Principals' Actions

Considered next are the principals reports of their typical responses to teacher misconduct, including the extent to which they handled or referred such incidents, their initial actions, their timing, and their main objectives in such cases. Finally, the activities the principals engaged in to hold incidents to a minimum are explored.

The principals saw themselves as responsible for their organizations and their personnel. As one of them put it, "The responsibility for staff is mine." Moreover, the principals believed this to be in keeping with the expectations of others. One stated that "the district has an expectation that I'll handle incidents with teachers," and another remarked that "our superintendent wants us to be the front line." In fact, when the principals were asked if there were incidents of teacher misbehavior that they would refer immediately to the district central office, 85% said "no." The seven administrators who replied in the affirmative cited extreme incidents such as teacher arrest on criminal charges. However, the large negative response did not mean that the district office remained uninformed. Two typical comments were "I'll handle it and inform the superintendent" and "I have to tip off the superintendent so he's not surprised by a phone call, but I have to look into incidents first."

As was the case with the recalled incidents, the principals reported that they typically entered the action early using quite direct approaches. All 45 principals indicated their first step was to investigate the situation, ordinarily by meeting with the involved teacher. Although direct and speedy intervention appeared to be their favorite mode of operation, in response to a question about timing, more than 90% of

the principals indicated that the rapidity of their reactions depended on their assessment of the severity of the situation or their estimates of its potential for damage.

The principals were queried about their main objectives when taking action in a case of teacher misbehavior. All 93 of their responses could be grouped in two closely related categories. One stressed dampening and containment, the other centered on resolution of the problem. The principals wanted situations of this kind to be dealt with and concluded, but they wanted it done in ways that would "save face," reduce the likelihood of future incidents, and preserve the integrity and reputation of their schools.

Finally, the principals were asked to name some activities that they found helpful in holding cases of teacher misbehavior to a minimum. More than 95% of the administrators cited activities that promoted positive teacher behavior through cooperative and supportive means. Examples included maintaining communication with teachers, being accessible to them, counseling them, encouraging them and briefing them on expectations. Almost 45% of the principals also mentioned monitoring or investigative activities. Specific activities of this sort cited were maintaining high visibility in the school, observing classrooms, being alert to possible problems and promptly looking into them.

Discussion

Our findings are based on the self reports of a carefully chosen but relatively small sample. Thus, many of our interpretations are essentially hypotheses with some tentative empirical support and some of them are more purely speculative. With these caveats, we turn to a discussion of the study.

The bulk of the recalled incidents dealt with inappropriate teacher behavior toward students, and there was substantial mention by the principals of hypothetical student-related "damaging" teacher behavior. Both suggest a trend towards more role-specific norms for teachers. Primary attention was given to teachers' work with and relationships to students. To be sure, the interviews showed unmistakable vestiges of a more diffuse concern for teacher "morality," but the guise was a modern one. The concern was not so much with teachers' private lives as it was with teachers as examples for students and as persons who should behave in ways that earn the respect of the students and the community.

The principals appeared to have developed a sense of the limits of acceptable teacher behavior based on their perceptions of community expectations and their own values, both general ones and those keyed to schools and educational matters. As heads of public and politically vulnerable organizations with a young and impressionable clientele, they frequently exemplified the rule of anticipated reactions (Friedrick, 1937), dampening and containing situations that they believed would elicit negative reactions, especially from parents and the community. Once an incident had taken place and the principals had determined that the thresholds of deviance had been crossed, they moved swiftly to protect their organizations. In doing so, they attempted to find internal solutions that generated a minimum of talk and publicity. They informed their superiors of serious cases, but they preserved to themselves as much leeway for action as possible under the circumstances and tried to "keep the hounds away from the superintendent's door" as one of them put it.

The principals in the present sample could be characterized as threshold guardians. The behavior they reported indicated that they were sensitive to and, when necessary, actively engaged in countering teacher misconduct that could threaten the legitimacy of their organizations in the community. They knew what was happening

and even what was allegedly happening in their schools because sources within or close to their organizations brought them information which they checked and pursued if they felt it was warranted.

Meyer and Rowan's account of institutional organizations stresses ritual legitimation and the logic of confidence. Their perspective neglects the internal monitoring described by the principals and probably common to a variety of public organizations. This monitoring, which is hardly consistent with the notion of a logic of confidence, is directed to the maintenance of the organization's external legitimation, that is, to its legitimation in the larger community. In fact, the maintenance of confidence and legitimation appeared to be genuinely problematic for the principals, not something that was ritualistically given. Their depictions of incidents of teacher misconduct were full of portrayals of administrative efforts to protect and sustain their schools' reputations and positions in the community. The stories that they told clearly implied that legitimacy is never final or permanent, but must be protected and sometimes even regained.

The paucity of serious cases of teacher misconduct reported by the principals is consistent with the idea set forth earlier that teachers are aware of the rules of the game and ordinarily abide by them. If this is so, it indicates certain limits to the notion of loose coupling. For one thing, a counter explanation for what appears to be loose coupling is suggested. Teachers protect their autonomy by accepting limits, and by recognizing and not crossing thresholds. This permits principals to enjoy cordial relationships with teachers and it permits teachers to enjoy considerable leeway in their work. At the same time, the organization is protected. Clearly, when teacher behavior approaches the thresholds of impropriety, administrator intervention is highly likely. The area of thresholds is characterized by the tight coupling of administrative supervision and teacher behavior.

Willard Waller (1932) called schools museums of virtue. This peculiar feature of school organizations gives them a special flavor. They are truly creatures of the society as Meyer and Rowan and many others before them have argued. But society is not as homogeneous as some assume. It is pluralistic, composed of many communities, and everyone has a legitimate right to raise questions about these public organizations which have stewardship over the community's children and youth. We need additional insights into the ways in which school organizations and their personnel behave in response to these kinds of forces. The present study indicates that the theoretical insights provided by the loose coupling concept and by the institutional organizations perspective are not sufficient to the task. The blanket designation of educational organizations as loosely coupled is clearly misleading. This concept and the concepts of ritualistic legitimation and the logic of confidence shift attention from what appears to be a key feature of public school organizations. This key feature is the devotion of members of these organizations to mechanisms that protect their schools' legitimacy. Our work suggests the importance of problematic legitimation and bounded leeway. It further suggests a symmetry to these two concepts. Leeway is bounded sharply by proscriptions on behavior that is perceived to contain potential threats to legitimacy. Ideas like these seem essential to an improved understanding of school organizations and the behavior of their members.

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